



Elizabeth Alexander, Poet

Elizabeth Alexander was less than a year old when her parents took her to the 1963 civil rights March on Washington, which culminated in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Forty-six years later she would witness the inauguration of Barack Obama, the first African-American president, this time as an honored guest, having been invited by the president-elect to read a poem for the occasion. In the intervening years, Alexander became a highly regarded educator, essayist and poet. Her family relocated to Washington the same year she saw King speak. Her father served in a number of government positions, eventually becoming the first African-American secretary of the Army. Her mother became a professor of African-American history at George Washington University.

Alexander graduated from Yale University and studied at Boston University with Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott, who steered her from fiction writing to poetry. Starting in 1991, she taught English at the University of Chicago, where she made the acquaintance of Obama, then a law professor at the school. Since 2008,



Elizabeth Alexander recites a poem during the presidential inauguration ceremonies in Washington.

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Alexander has chaired the African American Studies department at Yale. She teaches English literature, African-American literature and gender studies. Alexander's first collection of poems, *The*

Venus Hottentot, received widespread critical praise, and 2005's *American Sublime* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. On January 21, 2009, Alexander read "Praise Song for the Day" as part

of Obama's inauguration, making her one of only four poets to have participated in a presidential inauguration.

Poet Elizabeth Alexander and cellist Yo-Yo Ma at the 2010 World Science Festival opening night gala.
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